



# Race and News

*Critical Perspectives*

Christopher P. Campbell, Kim M. LeDuff,  
Cheryl D. Jenkins, and Rockell A. Brown

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The history of American journalism is marked by disturbing representations of people and communities of color, from the disgraceful stereotypes of pre-civil rights America, to the more subtle myths that are reflected in routine coverage by journalists all over the country. *Race and News: Critical Perspectives* aims to examine these journalistic representations of race, and in doing so to question whether or not we are living in a post-racial world. By looking at national coverage of stories like the Don Imus controversy, Hurricane Katrina, Barack Obama's presidential candidacy, and even the Virginia Tech shootings, readers are given an opportunity to gain insight into both subtle and overt forms of racism in the newsroom and in national dialogue.

The book itself is divided into two sections, with the first examining the journalistic routine and the decisions that go into covering a story with, or without, relation to race. The second section, comprised of case studies, explores the coverage of national stories and how they have affected the dialogue on race and racism in the United States. As a whole, the collection of essays and studies also reflects a variety of research approaches. With a goal of contributing to the discussion about race and its place in American journalism, this broad examination makes *Race and News* an ideal text for courses on cultural diversity and the media, as well as making it valuable to professional journalists and journalism students who seek to improve their approach to coverage of diverse communities.

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## Foreword

In the final chapter of his 2009 examination of race and economics, *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*, sociologist William Julius Wilson explains how he arrived at a sort of epiphany regarding America's dialogue on race and poverty. In his earlier work (he is the author or editor of a dozen books on the topic), he had argued that a color-blind approach to public policy would be the most effective way to bring about social change. That is, because so many Americans hold fervent misperceptions about the relationship between race and poverty—especially that black and Latino Americans are solely responsible for the dreadful economic conditions that affect them at a far greater rate than white Americans—Wilson once believed that it would be more effective to emphasize the impact of social, political and economic policies on *all* poor Americans, rather than on their disproportionate effect on minority communities. He explains his new position:

In framing public policy we should not shy away from an explicit discussion of the specific issues of race and poverty; on the contrary, we should highlight them in our attempt to convince the nation that these problems should be seriously confronted and that there is an urgent need to address them. The issues of race and poverty should be framed in such a way that not only is a sense of fairness and justice to combat inequality generated, but also people are made aware that our country would be better off if these problems were seriously addressed and eradicated.

(pp. 141–142)

In authoring a book about race and news, we find ourselves in complete agreement with the approach that Wilson now advocates. First, we hope that this book will encourage discussions about race that will lead to a broader understanding of the complex ways that skin color continues to affect American attitudes and public policy. Second, we hope that our analyses of race and news will have an impact on how journalists frame issues of race in the hope that news organizations will eventually provide audiences with coverage that conveys the sense of urgency that will be required to affect public policy and finally move America beyond its racist legacy.

We admit to being baffled by the discussions of American society as “post racial” that surfaced with Barack Obama’s candidacy for the presidency of the United States. It’s a comforting thought to believe that our country has moved beyond its racist past and that his election is evidence of racial harmony. But there is little evidence to support that belief. Americans who don’t happen to be white are far more likely to live in poverty, to receive a second-class education, to have inadequate health care and to be victims of racial discrimination. Our concern is that journalism routinely overlooks the impact of race and racism and has contributed to the notion that we are actually living in a post-racial world.

Our approach to the analysis of news coverage is largely rooted in a body of critical and cultural media studies that was influenced by Stuart Hall and other British Cultural Studies scholars, who believed in closely examining media *texts*—advertisements, television programs, news stories, etc.—to ascertain the meaning of those texts in the context of a broader cultural sense. That is, Hall and his colleagues believed that beneath the surface of the intended (or “preferred”) meaning of a media text was the subtle influence of political, social and economic power (Hall, 1982). A news story about a murder, for instance, might be viewed simply as a news organization’s routine coverage of violent crime. But for critical and cultural studies scholars, a story about a murder can also carry connotations about racial bias, about economic power, about social history, about political will, and so on. While most of our research is in the form of qualitative *textual analysis*—an approach best suited for answering *how* and *why* questions—a few chapters use quantitative data to answer questions like *who* and *how many*.

Our goal is not to empirically determine the amount or cause of journalism that has a racial context, but to contribute to a dialogue about race and news that we believe is too uncommon; we don’t pretend to have a solution to many of the problems that we identify. We do hope to get students, scholars and journalists to consider the issues that we raise, and we believe that it will take that kind of dialogue to arrive at solutions.

While the dominant theoretical paradigm that drives the research in this book is rooted in the work of British Cultural Studies, we've also been heavily influenced by American research on contemporary racism. Among the "types" of racism we examine are "modern," "symbolic" and "everyday" racism; these are ways of identifying the more subtle ways that racism surfaces in American culture in the early twenty-first century. Although America is not devoid of the kind of racism that marked the pre-Civil Rights era, blatant white supremacist attitudes are relatively rare. We are more concerned about the more pernicious and subtle ways in which contemporary racist attitudes can affect the social, political and economic landscape. We also cite the work of Critical Race Theory scholars, who move the discussion of race from ethnic minorities as *Others*, to the analysis of *whiteness* and the examination of how white privilege affects people's attitudes and their support of ill-considered public policy.

This book examines issues related to African Americans more than other ethnic minorities. This is a result of the research interests of the authors, but also speaks to the enormity of the black–white dichotomy in American culture. W. E. B. DuBois wrote more than 100 years ago in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line." We believe that the problem has not been resolved, and that racism remains the problem of the Twenty-First Century. Some of our analyses address coverage related to discrimination against Hispanic, Arab or Asian Americans, providing evidence that the color line that DuBois described is more complicated than ever. We hope that this book will inspire more analysis of the many ways that race plays out in America's increasingly multicultural society.

Indeed, our main goal for pursuing this research is to provoke discussion and to expand the ongoing dialogue about journalism and its potential to provide audiences with coverage that is free of racial stereotypes and offers useful insight into the complicated ways that race affects our world. After each chapter, we've provided a series of discussion questions and assignments that are designed to facilitate the discussion. We've also included lists of places to go for further information about each chapter, including links to Web sites where the dialogue is the most current.

The first part of this book, *Race and the Journalistic Routine*, examines the way that news organizations rely on conventions that dictate coverage that results in predictable but, often, misleading representations of ethnic minorities. Chapter 1, "Yes We Did?: *Race, Myth and the News Revisited*," examines the persistence of myths about race that were first identified in Christopher Campbell's 1995 book, *Race, Myth and the News*. The chapter

looks at local television news coverage of the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday in 2009, and it argues that the coverage is consistent with the problematic representations that Campbell identified in his 1995 study. The chapter argues that coverage of King Day in 2009, which occurred the day before the inauguration of President Barack Obama, dramatically reinforced the “myth of assimilation,” which provides audiences with a sense of America’s triumph over racism despite overwhelming evidence that American racism is alive and healthy.

Chapter 2, “Newsroom Diversity and Representations of Race,” provides a critical examination of how the newspaper industry has handled the coverage of complex topics that deal with issues like race with limited insight from a diverse workforce. Data shows that newsroom employment diversity declined in the early 2000s at most daily newspapers in the United States. This is problematic as recent U.S. Census figures show that mainstream media now covers and serves a more diverse population. The lack of cultural and historical perspective from members of the media creates routine journalism that in many instances ends up reflecting the “preferred meanings” of a still dominant white society. And, even though the physical numbers of the population indicate a shift downward in the proportionate number of whites in this country, the reality is that from a hegemonic standpoint the values of this group constitute the dominant ideology in the newsroom. The implications of having limited diversity in newsrooms and the effect that it has on news content and how media are viewed in society was apparent in the coverage of remarks made by Senator Harry Reid in 2008 about President Barack Obama’s lighter skin tone and lack of “negro” dialect helping his chances of winning the democratic nomination. Known to forgo traditional notions of objective news reporting in favor of a more reflective, interpretive approach, black newspapers were able to reflect on the systemic and structural inequalities that continue to exist in this country and included the influence of race on the discussion about Reid’s remarks. This chapter argues that such context is often missing from mainstream news reporting, particularly when it comes to covering sensitive matters like race. Mainstream journalists tend to take an episodic rather than a thematic perspective towards the events they cover which leaves out valuable information for interpretation and reflection. This chapter argues that this shortcoming of the American mass media makes it important to take stock of whether or not this institution has figured out a way to meet the challenges of serving a more diverse population.

Chapter 3, “National News Coverage of Race in the Era of Obama,” takes a critical look at major news stories involving race that rose to prominence between the summers of 2008 and 2009. The election of the first

African-American president in the U.S. might suggest a post-racial America, but this study questions that notion in light of other news stories during that year. This critique positions Parts I and II of CNN's *Black in America* series as virtual bookends for a year that not only included Obama's election, but racially charged "tea party" and town hall meetings, the arrest of African-American scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. at his own home, and a group of minority students being ejected from a Philadelphia country club pool. The chapter suggests that the U.S. still has work to do in regards to race relations.

Chapter 4, "New' News, Hegemony and Representations of Black Male Athletes," examines the intersection of race, sex and mass media through an interpretive textual analysis of mediated representations of black male athletes involved in controversies concerning sex and white women. Based in Critical Mixed Race Theory, the chapter analyzes several modern examples to illustrate this intersection by examining the hegemonic racial codes and mythmaking that surface in media coverage of black male athletes. Athletes featured in the analysis include Terrell Owens, LeBron James and Tiger Woods. The analysis suggests that issues of race (particularly racism) are stereotypically represented in U.S. contemporary news coverage as there remains a tendency for media organizations to fall back on the familiar common-sense way of portraying black males as hypersexual beasts.

Chapter 5, "From the Water Cooler to the World Wide Web: Race and Audience Commentary on News Stories On-line," examines user posts on newspaper Web sites in response to news stories where race and ethnicity were prominent factors. The results suggest that audiences feel comfortable expressing rude and often racist comments in the usually anonymous on-line environment. The results also indicate that story topics may play a role in whether users post comments related to actual stories or choose to discuss other community issues that are of greater concern. The chapter suggests that perhaps in this era of new media, the audience will play a greater role in setting the media's agenda by posting the issues that they deem most salient.

Chapter 6, "Ethnic News Media and Marginalization: African-American Newspaper Coverage of the AIDS Crisis," examines ethnic media and how the black press covered HIV and AIDS; the chapter also examines author Cathy Cohen's suggestion that "secondary marginalization" may be a factor with regard to HIV and AIDS and the African-American community. Specifically, the chapter examines black newspaper coverage of HIV and AIDS from 1991 through 2001 to better understand how HIV and AIDS information was disseminated, characterized and framed during that crucial second decade of the epidemic with special attention given to

coverage of people with AIDS. The chapter argues that it is important to have an understanding of how the news media frame complex issues, especially those pertaining to health, because the characterization or presentation of the information may influence or affect individuals' choices regarding health as well as public policy decisions. The findings indicate that some of the popular African-American newspapers have done only a mediocre job in their coverage of AIDS, even as it specifically pertains to African Americans and, perhaps unintentionally, contributed to the crisis during a critical period as AIDS spread in the black community.

The second part of the book, *Covering Race: Contemporary Case Studies*, examines news coverage of events from the first decade of the twenty-first century that included problematic representations of race. Chapter 7, "Simple Incivility or Outright Racism? How Newspapers Covered Joe Wilson's Outburst during Obama's Congressional Health Care Address," examines newspaper coverage after September 9, 2009, when President Obama addressed Congress about his plan for health care reform. During the speech he was interrupted with a boisterous "You lie!" from Republican Representative Joe Wilson of South Carolina. That incident brought into question whether or not the action was indicative of a clear lack of respect for the president or if it might have more to do with the president's race. This chapter is a critical analysis of newspaper coverage following Obama's speech and Wilson's outburst. Three publications were examined: *The Chicago Tribune*, *The State* (of Columbia, South Carolina) and the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. The chapter examines the difference in how the events were covered regionally.

Chapter 8, "The Real Price of Oppression: Fox News Coverage of the Virginia Tech Shooter," looks at one particular Fox News special, *Crime Scene: The Virginia Tech Massacre*, as an example of how national news coverage might be used to empower audiences and improve society rather than simply reporting the facts. Local newscasts and even national evening newscasts are severely limited by the length of the broadcasts. As a result, audiences are given headlines, as opposed to in-depth reporting that not only reports the facts but the social effects and the possible solutions. Long-form news reports like the one examined in this study have an advantage. There is more time to tell the story and include important details such as background and future social implications that are left out of short reports. But, unfortunately, as this chapter argues, sometimes these long-form reports fall short of their potential.

Chapter 9, "Nappy-Headed Hos': Media Framing, Blame Shifting and the Controversy over Don Imus' Pejorative Language," examines how the media covered the events that encompassed the 2007 Don Imus controversy and the shift from focusing on Imus' controversial statements and

subsequent repercussions to that of the tribulations of the hip hop culture and the use of misogynistic language in song lyrics by rap artists. The chapter argues that Imus' obvious use of "blame shifting" in this controversy and the media's framing of this incident to validate that shift is a palpable case of image restoration and the ideological constructions of reality. The subsequent framing of the Imus controversy by the media and the dual role this powerful cultural industry takes on in this controversy subtly undergirds the notion that the media became a "target audience" that was manipulated into constructing a reality that Imus' racist language was a part of a bigger problem in the African-American community's sub-culture known as hip hop. Imus used the news media to defend his image by shifting the blame away from his racist, sexist remarks and redirecting the controversy to a mediated discourse on the "in group" language of the hip hop culture; the media in turn create momentum not necessarily about Imus' comments, but follow the blame to the hip hop community.

Chapter 10, "Recoding New Orleans: Race, News, Representation and Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*," examines national coverage of events in New Orleans shortly after the city flooded when the city's levees failed during Hurricane Katrina. It contrasts that coverage, which depicted much of the city's African-American population as primitive and criminal, with the representations of the same population in Spike Lee's documentary about the events. The chapter notes the significant difference between deadline-driven daily news coverage and the more reflective approach of documentary production, but it argues that daily journalists could learn something from Lee's more thoughtful, more accurate and less stereotypical examination of the New Orleanians who were victimized by the flooding that inundated the city after Katrina.

Chapter 11, "Localizing Terror, Creating Fear in Post 9/11 Local TV News," examines data that was collected at a time when America was consumed by the terrorist attacks and the possibility of waging war on those believed to be responsible. In the spring of 2003 as the U.S. engaged in war with Iraq, many local TV news stations across the country thought it might be useful to look into possible terrorist connections in their respective cities. A series of reports on one local station in Indianapolis, Indiana, exemplified how the media perpetuated unnecessary and unwarranted fear in viewers. This chapter argues that while people of Middle Eastern descent were once largely absent in the American media, news coverage of this group post 9/11 stereotypes them by oversimplifying their religion, ethnicity and culture and often equates them with terrorism. This is dangerous for members of this group as well as Americans who passively accept these stereotypes.

Chapter 12, “Race and Objectivity: Toward a Critical Approach to News Consumption,” examines the fundamental notion that how journalists are traditionally trained to report news stories—“objectively”—may be problematic when those stories deal with a complex issue like race. Using the examples of the media’s coverage of the Don Imus controversy and Hurricane Katrina, the chapter argues that when covering complex topics that involve issues of race, ethnicity and culture, taking an interpretive approach to news coverage can provide a more “truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning” than the traditional idea of reporting in “an unbiased and objective way,” or reporting free of interpretation. The benefits of news being reported and interpreted for clarity, value and cultural significance may be a more useful tool for journalists than just repeating facts that have no intrinsic meaning or value to everyday citizens. This chapter argues that the interpretive approach allows journalists to look at the news through the eyes of those who are covered—those who are a part *of* the story. By explaining news developments in the context within which they are created, journalists are able to go beyond traditional news reporting and provide more critical evaluation and meaning.

The book’s Afterword, “Re-thinking the News: How American Journalism Can Improve Coverage of Race and Racism,” offers a general discussion of the issues that we’ve examined with an eye toward how news organizations might provide coverage that will contribute to a healthier dialogue on race and race relations. But we don’t see the Afterword as the final word, and we hope that our readers—students, teachers, scholars, journalists—will continue to discuss these issues and to contribute to a dialogue that will result in improved news coverage of minority communities and matters of race. Indeed, we hope that our readers will use our analyses as models for their own projects, and we hope those projects will provide additional insight to a dialogue that we believe is of paramount significance.

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PART **1**

# Race and the Journalistic Routine



CHAPTER 1

Yes We Did?

*Race, Myth and the News Revisited*

CHRISTOPHER P. CAMPBELL, KIM M. LEDUFF AND  
ROCKELL A. BROWN

The editorial cartoon in the January 19, 2009, edition of *The Clarion-Ledger*, the daily newspaper in Jackson, Mississippi, featured a drawing of “History’s Calendar,” with Monday, January 19, identified as Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and these words: “Yes we can.” Tuesday, January 20, was identified as Inauguration Day and read, “Yes we did.” The cartoon was drawn by Pulitzer Prize-nominee Marshall Ramsey, whose common-sense understanding of the inauguration of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States was reflected in news coverage from all over the country that day: That the inauguration of the country’s first African-American president was evidence of the fulfillment of Dr. King’s dream.

Such “common sense” has been evident in news coverage of King Day ever since 1986, when the third Monday in January was first celebrated as a national holiday. Christopher Campbell, whose 1995 book *Race, Myth and the News* examined coverage of the holiday in 29 American cities, described the typical coverage of King Day as a reflection of a “myth of assimilation.” He argued:

The ultimate message of nearly all of the coverage of the King holiday ... was that American racism was a thing of the past. The occasional contradiction of that notion was overshadowed by the dominant theme of storytelling and imagery that testified to America as a melting pot. In its coverage of King Day, local television journalism constructed a world in which The American